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AUTHOR Hanson, Mary Ellen
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ABSTRACT

In the late 19th century and the early 20th century, an era of narrowly circumscribed female roles, basketball created tension by expanding women's opportunities for competitive athletic activity. The characteristics which made it popular with women--spontaneity, freedom of movement, and vigorous team play--contradicted prevailing ideals of feminine behavior, which were understood to be demure, restrained, and passive. The response to women's basketball exemplifies the ambiguity of women's education in late 19th- and early 20th-century America, and the controversy continued throughout the first half of the 20th century. Basketball for girls and women has been called "the bane of four generations of collegiate educators." Educators, youth workers, towns, schools, colleges, and players themselves have promoted women's basketball for a variety of conflicting reasons. And, despite controversy, regulation, and rule modification, basketball has remained one of the most popular sports for women. The author, in discussing competition vs. recreation in the early development of women's basketball (1891-1922), concentrates on three topics: (1) the game's rapid acceptance as a collegiate and secondary school activity; (2) the phenomenon of rule modifications for female players; and (3) the effect of sex role ideology on the attitudes of physical educators. (JMK)

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Mary Ellen Hanson
University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico

Competition Vs. Recreation in the Early Development of Women's Basketball, 1891-1922

In discussing competition vs. recreation in the early development of women's basketball, I will concentrate on three topics:

1. The game's rapid acceptance as a collegiate and secondary school activity,
2. The phenomenon of rule modifications for female players,
3. And, the effect of sex role ideology on the attitudes of physical educators.

The rapid development of women's basketball in late nineteenth-century America attested to its immediate popularity. For players and spectators, it was the focus of active competition; yet it was also regularly promoted by physical educators as a recreational, playful activity. This dichotomy reflects conflicting perceptions regarding women in America at the turn of the century. While women's basketball was enthusiastically accepted by players and physical educators, it was marked by rule changes based on assumptions about female endurance as well as policy shifts from varsity competition to intramural play.

Invention of Basketball

The game which became the most popular team sport for women was originally designed as a light recreation for sedentary men. Prior to 1900, indoor exercise programs were limited to activities such as marching and gymnastic apparatus work. In 1891, Luther Gulick, director of the YMCA Training School at Springfield, Massachusetts, asked his students to devise an indoor activity for Y participants who found gymnastic and calisthenic exercises boring. One of his students, James A. Naismith, took on the problem and designed the game of basketball "as a form of enjoyable recreation for men of middle age." (Scott, p. 24)

The first tryout of the new game occurred in mid-December, 1891, with eighteen non-athletic (male) secretaries at the YMCA Training School. There were nine players on each team, but Naismith felt the game could accommodate as many as twenty-five per team. (Miller, p. 3) The first official game was held on January 20, 1892.

Women's involvement in the new game was almost immediate. A group of young female teachers observed the first demonstration game and asked Naismith if they could play. He agreed and scheduled time for them to use the gymnasium. In his book, Basketball, Its Origins and Development (1941), Naismith recalled their appearance:

> I shall never forget the sight that they presented in their long trailing dresses with leg-of-mutton sleeves, and in several cases with the hint of a bustle. In spite of these handicaps, the girls took the ball and begin to shoot at the basket. (quoted in Miller, p. 5)

The group practiced regularly and in March, 1892 held the first scheduled competition in women's basketball. (Ibid.)

Collegiate Women's Basketball

From Springfield, the game spread quickly to women's colleges in the area. Senda Berenson, director of physical education at Smith, was the first to introduce the game to a women's college program in 1892. Berenson explained basketball's appeal to students as follows:

> Women have long felt the need of some sport that would combine both the physical development of gymnastics and the abandon and delight of true play. (quoted in Miller, pp. 6, 9)

By 1900, basketball was mentioned in the catalogs of Barnard, Bryn Mawr, Elmira, Goucher, Mills, Mt. Holyoke, Radcliffe, Rockford, Smith, Vassar, Wellesley and Wells College. (Miller, pp. 7-8) It spread to the West and Midwest, "with college. . . , high school. . . and town teams all playing each other." (Hodgson, p. 13) Women's intercollegiate contests were first held in 1896, when the University of California, Berkeley, met Stanford and the University of Washington met Ellensburg Normal School. (Gerber, pp. 51, 62)

Several accounts of collegiate women's games note that male spectators were not allowed, since the players wore bloomer costumes. Variations of Amelia Bloomer's dress reform to permit greater freedom of movement had been adopted for college physical education programs. Male spectators were banned from the games "because physical educators did not wish women to be seen in. . . abbreviated dress." (Gerber, p. 31) On one occasion at the University of Oregon, male students disguised themselves in women's clothes and veiled their faces in order to attend a women's game. When Smith College held an interclass game in 1894, the Boston Sunday Globe carried a full story. Hundreds attended

the game, but males were denied admittance. (Gerber, pp. 58, 62) The liberalization of attitudes about women's physicality which permitted team sports was also accompanied by anxiety that sexual decorum be maintained.

From a mild beginning in the 1890s, intercollegiate competition for women increased in the 1900s. This competition was controversial and existed simultaneously with intramural programs. The University of Nebraska's shift from intercollegiate to intramural emphasis is indicative of the contradictory attitudes regarding team sports for women. Women's basketball was introduced to Nebraska's sophomore gymnasium classes in 1896 and a varsity team was formed which played local high school and YWCA teams. Between 1897 and 1907 the varsity schedule included the Universities of Missouri, Minnesota and Kansas. (Wilkie, p. 214)

The head of women's physical education at Nebraska advocated basketball and women's athletics. In 1902 she wrote: "it is to be hoped that before many years college women will enjoy the privilege of friendly contests with each other." She described the desirable qualities which basketball competition fostered as: "training of body and mind, . . .self-control, and capacity for self-sacrifice." (quoted in Wilkie, p. 214)

Nebraska's program was successful. Admission was charged for women's games and they made enough to help finance the men's athletic program. Despite the game's popularity and support by the women's physical education director, in 1908 Nebraska's dean of women ordered varsity games discontinued "on the grounds of 'hindrance to health' and

that [the games] 'made for less womanly conduct by the girls.'" (Wilkie, pp. 214-215) In 1908, the University of Nebraska regents forbade women's interstate athletic contests, a ruling which remained in effect for the next sixty years.

At the same time that intercollegiate competition was active, Nebraska sponsored a lively intramural basketball program. Annual women's interclass games began in 1901. Tournaments continued for many years in the tradition approved by female physical educators such as Senda Berenson, who was "firmly against competing with other colleges," but fully supported intramural competition for girls. (Gerber, p. 58)

Changing the Rules

The ambivalence regarding women's basketball as recreation or competition grew out of prevailing social and pedagogical attitudes about women's roles and capabilities. A contradiction was evident in the immediate adoption of basketball as a healthy activity for young women and in the immediate modification of rules of play to suit the ascribed physical limitations of young women.

By the late 1800s women's and coeducational colleges included physical culture departments which advocated "mild physical activity" to benefit their sedentary students. (Twin, p. xxiii) Activities such as gardening, rowing, gymnastic exercise, croquet and archery were encouraged. Between 1890 and 1910, "a distinct shift away from gymnastic exercises and toward sport participation " took place in women's college programs. (Gerber, p. 49)

Sports for men and women students differed both in origin and in purpose. Men's sport programs were initially organized and conducted

by the students themselves while women's sport activities were initiated and guided by women physical educators. (Gerber, p. 50) Men's sports were seen as vehicles to foster the aggressive individuality necessary to survive and prosper in industrial American society.

Women's athletics, on the other hand, were designed and supervised by educators to promote characteristics appropriate to women's roles as wives and mothers. In addition to providing healthful exercise, women's sports were justified as encouraging the cooperative, supportive qualities necessary for them to be helpmates. Since male and female roles and character were thought to be quite different, it followed that different rationales were necessary for them to engage in similar activities such as team sports.

Because it was commonly believed that "women were more vulnerable than men to heart strain, exhaustion, and jarred reproductive organs," female educators adapted basketball rules "to conform with women's assumed or desired physical limitations." (Twin, pp. xxv-xxvi) Women players could not hold the ball more than three seconds, take or strike the ball from another player's hands, or bounce the ball more than three times above waist height. Naismith's original game, which was "a good deal slower and less strenuous than today's game," (Schaafsma, p. 2) was further modified for women to allow only "brief, broken movements in a small space." (Twin, p. xxvi) The resulting game was relatively restrained. In 1893 after using Naismith's rules, Senda Berenson modified them to eliminate "roughness." (Paterson, p. 32) By the late 1890s many schools and localities had drawn up their own

rules and few sections of the country played basketball alike. (Miller, p. 6)

In 1899, at a Conference on Physical Training held at Springfield, Massachusetts, a Women's Basketball Rules Committee was formed to draw up a standard set of rules for girls. (Gerber, p. 81; Miller, p. 6) The Committee became the National Women's Basketball Committee in 1905.

Interscholastic Girls' Basketball

Interscholastic basketball spread rapidly as the result of collegiate influence and YWCA promotion of the game nationally and internationally. By the early 1900s high school girls all over the country competed in games against college teams, other high school teams, and even some boys' grade school teams. In the small town of Tabor, Iowa, the high school girls' varsity team scrimmaged regularly with the boys' team since neither squad had enough players to divide for practice. (personal recollection of Ella Moyers Johnson, the author's grandmother) Men's rules and male coaches were often used in girls' high school games.

Professional women physical educators generally did not favor extramural competition and worked actively to discourage it beginning in 1922. In that year the National Recreation Congress passed a resolution opposing intense athletic competition for girls. (Hackensmith, p. 430) Educators were more successful at curtailing intercollegiate basketball competition than they were at dampening "the amazing growth of athletic competition in elementary and secondary schools and industrial leagues." (Hackensmith, p. 429) School girls avidly competed for district, regional and state basketball championships.

Competition Vs. Recreation

As competitive sports for women emerged at the turn of the century, early reactions by women physical educators took the form of "informal and cautious disapproval" of inter-school competition. Much of the literature arguing against competition expressed concern "that it was not in keeping with the ideals of womanly behavior." (Gerber, p. 68)

Competitive sport for college women had existed as early as the 1860s when Vassar College organized baseball teams which played weekly games. Intercollegiate sport for women did not become an issue until basketball was introduced. When the game spread from Smith to other women's colleges, "a student clamor arose for intercollegiate play." (Evans quoted in Gerber, p. 69) The relative excitement and action of basketball (however conservative the rules) was a qualitative departure from earlier, therapeutic physical education for women.

Basketball became the subject of "vociferous debate among women physical educators [who were] convinced that the game's 'fighting features' developed aggressive characteristics." (Welch, p. 32) Most women educators saw recreational sport as healthful exercise and a means to reinforce desirable feminine qualities of cooperation and unselfishness. They did not wish to imitate the more competitive attitude of men's athletics. Noted male physical educators of the day, including Luther Gulick, supported this approach.

The physical educators reflected prevailing attitudes about women's proper sphere. Their rationale for girls' sports emphasized the healthful, playful and recreational aspects of "play for play's

sake." These aspects were stressed in intramural contests, rather than the keener competition of intercollegiate or interscholastic tournaments.

School policy was mixed on the issue of competition vs. intramural recreation for women. A 1909 survey of women's colleges noted that:

> Most of the. . .colleges in the East and many of the coeducational institutions do not play outside games but have interclass contests. . . . In the Middle West and West, intercollegiate contests are more common, but the percentage playing them. . .is less than one-half. (quoted in Gerber, p. 62)

Some women physical educators and their associations continued to focus efforts on eliminating intercollegiate games. In 1917 two groups were formed to make and interpret rules concerning women's college sports: the Committee on Women's Athletics and the Athletic Conference of American College Women. The two college groups, along with the National Association of Physical Education for College Women, "exerted a marked influence on the attitude of physical educators toward intercollegiate athletics for women." By 1922 a survey of fifty colleges and universities revealed that only eleven institutions continued to sponsor women's intercollegiate competition in basketball. (Hackensmith, p. 429)

In an era of narrowly circumscribed female roles, basketball created tension by expanding women's opportunities for competitive athletic activity. The characteristics which made it popular with

women--spontaneity, freedom of movement, and vigorous team play--contradicted prevailing ideals of feminine behavior, understood to be demure, restrained and passive.

The response to women's basketball exemplifies the ambiguity of women's education in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America. Expanding opportunities, such as the demand for female teachers, were accompanied by greater variety in educational experiences. The eagerness of women students and their educators to explore these opportunities was tempered by their acceptance of prevailing social mores, which dictated a restricted sphere of appropriate female behavior.

The controversy continued throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Basketball for girls and women has been called "the bane of four generations of collegiate educators." Educators, youth workers, towns, schools, colleges and the players themselves have promoted women's basketball for a variety of conflicting reasons. And despite controversy, regulation, and rule modification, basketball has remained "one of the most popular sports for women since its invention." (Gerber, p. 91)

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